

**“On the Nubians
of the
Jardin d’Acclimatation”
by Doctor Charles Letourneau**

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Robert K. Stevenson: Translator and Editor



**These Nubian boys, as do all other true Nubians,
possess beautiful, intelligent-looking eyes.**

“On the Nubians of the Jardin d’Acclimatation”

Last year the Society greatly desired that I undertake an examination from the ethnological and sociological point of view of the Nubians penned up somewhat like wild animals in the Jardin d’Acclimatation. My personal observations of these people, if I must limit myself, have taught me a few things. Regrettably, I have hardly been able to examine the portable objects and utensils that the troop possesses. However, most fortunately, I have been able to converse in his own language with the Italian impresario who had conducted the Nubians to Paris. He is a Venetian who had spent a good number of years in Nubia, in the Kingdom of Shoa in Abyssinia, where he himself had been a prisoner of Theodore. The information that he has provided me is very precise, is in total accord with what we already know about Nubian customs and morals, and serves, in my estimation, as a guarantee for the accuracy of new facts.

I

The individuals speaking Nubian interned at the Jardin d’Acclimatation belong to diverse races, a fact that has been established beyond any doubt by Doctor Bordier. There are among them true Nubians, possessing a straight but narrow forehead, a finely-modeled nose, slightly prognathous jaw, slender calf muscles, and very light brown skin. Nearly all have beautiful, intelligent-looking eyes, and two of them have a completely feminine physiognomy. The others are really either Negroes or strongly Negroid individuals. The women are very short in height.

All come from a district located on the right bank of the Suakin River, between the Red Sea and the Abyssinian massif.

Somewhat agriculturalists, but above all shepherds, they live principally at the expense of their flocks; but, they nevertheless cultivate sorghum as well as African maize, whose kernels the women extract and crush between two stones, creating a coarse flour, out of which they make flat bread. On this subject it must be noted that the Nubians are quite voracious, and eat three or four more times a day than a European. In addition, they also use the grains of sorghum to make African beer—*pombé*—which is consumed throughout middle Africa.

The agriculture of the Nubians is extremely rudimentary. Utilizing no implements of husbandry, they restrict themselves to planting seeds in deep holes with a pointed stick. Later on they weed, and when the moment arrives, they reap the crop. It was in this same way that agriculture commenced throughout the world. The soil tilled by the Nubians is very fertile and its cultivation barely requires more than a fortnight of work each year.

The Nubian arts, like agriculture, are completely rudimentary. I have heard them sing, under the direction of their priest and in monotone airs, religious songs. They accompany themselves with a coarse stringed instrument which is common in all parts of Ethiopia—the *rababa*—kind of a guitar with six strings;

all the strings possess the same diameter and length, and are wrapped around a movable roller, decorated with skin, which more or less serves to stretch them. A sort of bowl covered with a skin serves as a resonator.

Their graphic arts will not be found to be any more advanced. The only sample that I have viewed consisted of a crowned lion, sufficiently well engraved on the shaft of the blade of a large, straight iron sword.

The fancy of the Nubians for adornment manifests itself above all in their hair styles, which everybody has seen and which bring to mind the ancient Egyptian and Assyrian coiffures. The hair of the men forms on the sinciput a sort of massive clump, which is surrounded on its fringe by drooping, stiff wicks that are coated with tallow. The women wear a small silver ornament implanted in the side of the nose, and their cheeks sport some vertical lines of tattoo scars.



**Nubian woman in wedding dress.
The silver ring implanted in the side of her
nose is a common sight in Nubian women.**

Their main weapons are the javelin and sword. The javelin is a variety of the African assegai; it comes equipped with a long, large oval-shaped shield made of iron. The javelin's length is about 1 meter, and its handgrip is furnished with an iron collar that is equilibrated to the sharp iron end, which allows the assegai to serve as a missile weapon. The sword, which calls to mind the one used by our medieval ancestors, is long and straight, double-edged to the hilt, and has a slender dimension because the Nubians have small hands. In their country they apparently have some firearms, though not many.

Like the majority of Africans, they are blacksmiths and metallurgists; they know how to reduce and transform the mineral form of iron, which is abundant in Nubia, hammering the pure iron thus obtained.

Their outer clothing is quite plain; it is solely composed of a white cotton drape, decorated with a red band, which is able to cover a man from the neck to his calves. The women are clothed like the men; but, before their marriage they only wear a short skirt.

The Nubians also know how to work leather, and make their own sandals and saddles.

Their abodes, very crudely constructed, are nothing but straw huts, analogous to those of the Negroes of central Africa.

Their domesticated animals are: the horse, donkey, camel, ox, and goat.

They hunt the giraffe, rhinoceros, and elephant, which they ordinarily kill with thrusts of the sword. To effect the kill, two horsemen combine their efforts. One has the mission of irritating the animal, galloping in front of it. The other follows cautiously, hiding himself as much as possible. Then, seizing a favorable moment, he slices the hocks of the beast with his long sword, an exploit that he usually accomplishes without dismounting from his horse, except when it is a matter of felling an elephant. In this latter case the hunter dismounts before attacking. The sword that he avails himself of for these cynegetic feats is the same one that I described earlier. During these occasions he wields it with two hands and, as the grip is of small dimension, he trims the hide with the lower part of the blade.

II

The social life of the Nubians is odd. They make perpetual war from tribe to tribe and, like the Abyssinians, usually practice on the vanquished total emasculation; after the victory they return to their villages carrying, driven into the tip of their spears, their bloody trophies.

They possess slaves; some, slaves from birth, are for the most part Negroes; the others, slaves through capture or from war, must be taken far away to be sold because they are difficult to guard.

The Nubian government is entirely despotic. All rights, even those pertaining to life and death, belong to the tribal chief.

The women are truly domestic slaves, rarely going out except to visit with one's neighbors in the nearby huts or tents.

The Nubians are polygamous and buy their wives. But, in order for there to be a profitable sale, the maiden put up for sale must be a virgin. Therefore the family's parents kill without mercy those of their daughters who permit themselves to have a lover, and they make sure to practice infibulation on their infants of the female sex, suturing the genitals shut. This preventative suture is not incised but at the moment of marriage, thought this procedure is performed solemnly and in the presence of the parents and future husband.

With the Nubians, as is the case in most primitive societies, land ownership is not yet individualized. The vast territory of the tribe, from which every member hardly ever dares venture out, is possessed in common. Each one has the right to cultivate any such parcel that he wishes and, as the art of spreading manure on the ground is unknown, he often changes the piece of land that he cultivates.

The nominal religion of the Nubians is Mohammedanism; but, they occupy themselves little with it. The famous formula, "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet" suffices to content them. Further, they wear on each elbow—and I have been able to see this at the Jardin d'Acclimatation—small cylinders containing some verses of the Koran; this is hardly surprising, for fetishes under one form or another are in circulation throughout black and Mohammedan Africa. Although few or none of them worship, they usually do not bury the dead unless a priest or a relative utters over the tomb some verses of the Koran. However, the great interest in the ceremony consists of the funeral feast, during which they devour the oxen of the deceased.

Nevertheless, everything is not gross with the Nubians. The old people and the weak live ordinarily under the protection of some chief or powerful sheik, augmenting his numerous clientele; moreover, the Nubians care for their most pressing needs by more or less cultivating a piece of land. Lastly, their hospitality is very fully exercised. Everywhere they give to anyone board and lodging. Never does a Nubian depart on a trip without providing himself with provisions. Additionally, a number of persons only work a little at rare intervals, solely in order to replace their used clothing. As for the rest, they live as parasites.

The Nubians speak a hybrid language, a mixture of Arabic and Abyssinian. For writing they avail themselves of Arabic characters; but, the art of writing is almost a privilege of the Marabouts and some chiefs, to whom the Marabouts had given lessons during their childhood in this art.

They use the Arabic system of numeration, but they have great difficulty counting up to a thousand. Beyond this, most Nubians do not attach any precise idea to numbers.

Commerce is what one might expect it to be in a barbarous country where there is no security, neither for persons nor for goods. Nevertheless, markets do arise on the borders of the tribes. To carry out trade, tribesmen from both sides betake themselves in armed troops, from 500 to 1,000 men; the two tribal bands camp opposite each other, and groups of 30 to 40 men detach in order to conduct the exchanges. After the market closes, when one returns to his village, he is never sure that he won't be attacked and robbed.

Finally, in a sufficiently strange singularity, the coin most in use in Nubia is an Austrian thaler dated 1780, bearing the likeness of Maria Theresa; it came from Austria, where they coined it through the agency of Egypt. Other and less advanced forms of money are in circulation; they are: pieces of European cotton goods, rock salt crystals, occasionally feather stems filled with gold dust, and sometimes quite simply a measure of durra (African maize).